

1. We admitted we were powerless over our sexual obsessions—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Who wants to say, “I can’t stop; I can’t control myself; I can’t stay sexually sober”? Who wants to admit complete defeat, that our lives have become unmanageable? Even those of us with many years of sobriety do not enjoy making this admission. We want to be powerful; we want to be stronger than this addiction. None of us wants to admit personal powerlessness and unmanageability. Most of us were taught to be strong—to overcome our weaknesses with our will power. We tried stopping behavior, starting behavior; joining this, quitting that; buying this, discarding that; resisting this, giving in to that; and so on.... No matter what we tried, we still repeated our addictive behaviors, and our problems got worse. Hours, days, weeks, years of obsession and ritual scarred our self-esteem. We began to sense that we were spinning downwards, out of control, toward a life of loneliness, misery, jail, insanity, perhaps even death. Yet we still refused to admit powerlessness. That was for weak people—surely not us. We thought that admitting defeat was the lowest possible place for us to go. But isn’t that exactly where many of us have in fact gone—to the bottom?

Yet many of us continued to fight this admission of powerlessness even as we came into the rooms of SRA. We came seeking power. We came seeking the power we knew we had but just couldn’t quite make work. We needed just a little more help and then we would get this thing under control. “Besides,” we thought, “it wasn’t all that bad.” In fact, we really liked it a lot of the time. We said, “Yes, I need some help, but it’s not so bad that I need to say, ‘I can’t stay sober.’ Just

give me the right rules. Put me on the right track and I’ll take over. Just tell me what to do and I’ll straighten this thing out in no time. I just need the right answers.”

Then the first thing we heard was that we needed to admit that we were powerless. It was hard to accept this because the truth was painful: we were beaten, and beaten badly. Moreover, admitting powerlessness made us feel out of control. This was extremely difficult for us, because many of us came from dysfunctional families where we lived in out-of-control situations. So our need for feeling in-control became overwhelming. We had no control of our surroundings as children so the false promise of power offered by pornography and masturbation was intoxicating, exhilarating. Paying for pornography and prostitutes, intriguing with and manipulating people to be sexual with us, and masturbating to our well-controlled fantasies all gave us the illusion of power and control.

Like any other drug, our sexual addiction was intoxicating. Many of us felt strong, attractive, and in control, like masters of the universe. But in reality we were never in control; the disease was always in control of us. The truth was we had lost control of our sexual behavior, ourselves, and even our lives. Finally we were faced with the awful fact that getting our “power” through sex was not only an illusion, it was the very source of our loss of power.

The consequence of powerlessness is unmanageability. The term “unmanageability” can be elusive. In fact, most of us thought the term wasn’t even relevant to our lives. But what does it mean? It means the consequences of our inability to stop engaging in compulsive sexual behavior. This means different things to different people. Sometimes it means spending

all our money on pornography, phone sex or prostitutes. Other times it means the inability to pass a newsstand without being distracted or being unable to get to work on time. It can also mean fantasizing while at work or at home, which prevents us from doing our jobs or taking care of life’s daily activities. Ultimately, unmanageability can mean contracting serious diseases, and losing our jobs, our relationships and even our lives. The examples of unmanageability are endless, but the one thing that we have found is that few of us thought that the word applied to ourselves.

For this reason some of us got stuck on the second half of Step One. “Okay,” we said, “I may be powerless, but not all of my life is unmanageable. I have a job and a family and I can handle it all. So I have a secret life; why do I have to give it up? Maybe I have to let go of some things but others I can keep.” However, we all eventually had to ask ourselves, “If my life is so manageable, how did I get here?” It was then we finally realized that it was the consequences of our behavior that led us to this place.

As we became aware of this unmanageability and the powerlessness that caused it, we were faced with the first and deepest paradox of our recovery program: we discovered that not only were we powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable, but the path to recovery was simply to admit it. Our first step, the basic foundation of our program, is simply to say, “I can’t stay sexually sober.”

But we asked ourselves, “Isn’t this just giving up if I say that I can’t stay sober? How can this possibly help me? Shouldn’t I say that I’m going to stop and make a commitment to that?” Many of us have tried to stop and promised ourselves over and over, “I’ll never do that again.” The

first step never asks us to make a commitment. It never asks us to say, “I promise to stop” or “I vow never to act out again.” It simply states that we admitted we were powerless. It is this admission that works for us, and becomes the rock and foundation on which our program stands. Our experience shows us that the true source of our strength comes first and always from admitting that we are powerless.

“So how do I work the first step? Do I just say, ‘I can’t stay sober’? Is that all?” There are actually many ways we work Step One. Admitting at meetings that we are powerless, saying it to others privately, or praying about it are some of the ways. Some people also find it helpful to write out their sexual history, including examples of powerlessness and unmanageability, and share it with someone. This person could be a sponsor or another safe and understanding individual. Another way to work Step One is simply going to meetings. When we walk into the rooms of SRA we are making the statement that we need help and that we can’t do this on our own. When we speak in meetings we are also saying that we need other people to hear us; we need the healing of the rooms. When we pick up the phone to talk to others in the program, we are saying that we can’t do this on our own. In fact, every time we turn to the program we are essentially admitting our powerlessness.

Finally, we saw that others who had followed this path were not only sober, they were healthy and even happy. Seeing this healing in others encouraged us to move forward with the program. We stopped trying to fight our powerlessness and realized that taking Step One freed us to discover the possibilities of a new life. We found that taking the first step gave us the strength and courage to move on and work all the steps of SRA.

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